



from research to reality

BRIEF

RESEARCH
DEVELOPMENT
&
TECHNOLOGY
TRANSFER

Understanding Stress Among State Patrol Officers

Anecdotal information indicates that sworn law enforcement personnel throughout the country experience high levels of job stress, with impacts at both the individual and organizational level. On an organizational level, stress can lead to lost workdays, lower productivity, health and workers compensation costs, employee turnover (training costs) and possible legal fees. For the individual, the consequences of stress can be very personal, affecting physical or psychological well being and the ability to work.

What's the Problem?

WisDOT was concerned that sworn law enforcement personnel in its Division of State Patrol (DSP) were likewise experiencing high levels of work-related stress. However the department did not have hard data to quantify the extent of the problem and characterize it in a way that could lead to solutions.

Research Objectives

With the support of DSP management, WisDOT's Employee Assistance Program selected a consultant to carry out a systematic study of stress among DSP sworn officers. While initially scoped to include the development of intervention techniques, this study was later limited to (1) assessing current levels of work-related stress and (2) comparing results to stress in other comparable agencies. A follow-up study will develop strategies for mitigating stress.

Research Design

Evaluate personnel data. The consultant examined the WisDOT personnel database and time-and-travel-reporting system. Behavioral data (e.g. injuries/sick time and grievances) were also studied. All information was reported using position numbers with names removed to maintain anonymity.

Survey sworn officers. An anonymous mail survey was sent to the homes of 530 DSP sworn officers to collect information on the level of their overall and job-related stress, sources of stress, stress reduction services available/used, and a personal profile. A total of 362 surveys (68 percent) were returned.

Compare DSP to comparable agencies. A literature search was conducted of law enforcement agencies and other organizations that have taken measures to reduce employee stress. DSP stress levels and the resulting organizational impact were compared with stress levels and impacts in these other agencies.

Research Results

The following findings were drawn from the survey returns:

Organization stressors

- DSP sworn personnel are highly stressed
 - 51 percent rated their job-related stress as high – “4” or “5” on a 1-to-5 scale
 - 53 percent said that all or most of the officers they know suffer from job-related stress
- DSP sworn personnel do not feel that DSP is very concerned about their stress.
 - 22 percent said their immediate supervisors were concerned – “4” or “5” on a 1-to-5 scale
 - 13 percent said other DSP management staff were concerned
- The two most often cited reasons for job-related stress were related to the officers' superiors.
 - 66 percent of the officers cited “Superiors ‘second-guessing’ your actions”
 - 54 percent cited “Your superiors at DSP”

Critical Incident Stressors

- The third most often cited reason (46 percent) for job-related stress was “danger on the job.”
- Officers with more stress had experienced more critical incidents.

Investigators
The Dieringer
Research Group, Inc.

The Wisconsin
Department of
Transportation

Sworn personnel in WisDOT's Division of State Patrol frequently cited critical incidents as causes of stress.

“We confirmed that stress is a problem for State Patrol officers in Wisconsin—just as it is throughout the country. We’re working closely with Division of State Patrol leadership to find ways to reduce the causes of stress and provide better support to employees.”

- Sue Hunter,
Employee Assistance
Program Director

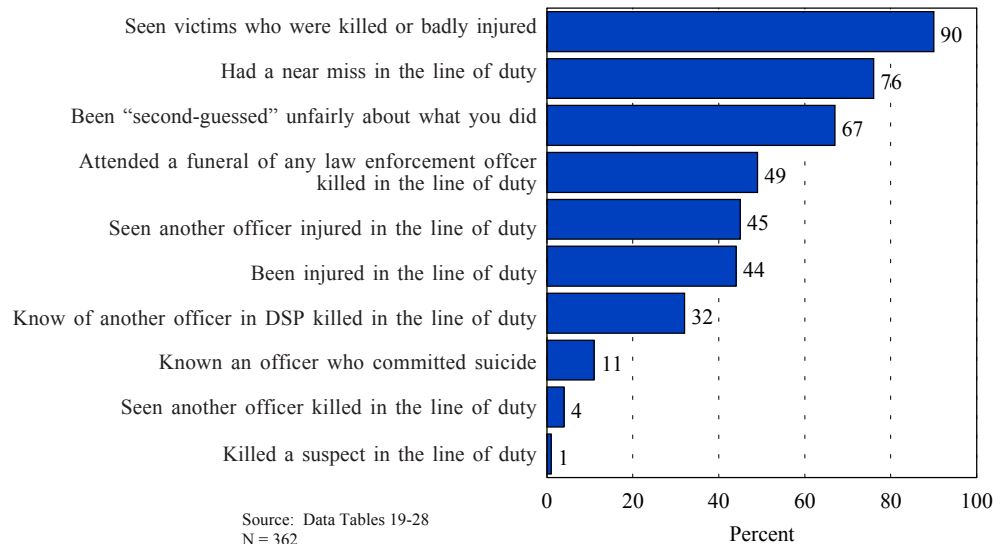
Wisconsin Department
of Transportation
RD&T Program
4802 Sheboygan Ave.
Madison, WI 53707
Nina McLawhorn
Research Administrator
608-266-3199

Examining Stress
Levels of DSP
Enforcement
Personnel and
Intervention
Techniques

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Incidence of Stress-Producing Events



Unqualified Stresses

- Older officers, higher ranking officers, and the longest serving officers were more stressed.
- Among higher ranking officers or their superiors, job-related stress was most often cited as a result of a combination of too many pressures and paperwork.
- The survey did not identify if organizational, critical incident or other factors contributed to the officers’ increased stress and the combination of too many pressures and paperwork.

Consequences of Stress

- Officers with more stress had suffered from more symptoms of stress such as “more irritable or quick tempered” and “suffered from sleeplessness.”

Utilization of Employee Assistance Program and Stress Management Services

- There was a high level of awareness of services available to treat stress. However, officers with more stress did not tend to use stress management services more than those without stress. Officers are aware of the Employee Assistance Program and its stress management services and use them about 5 percent of the time. The national average of EAP use is 6 percent.

Due to differences in data collection across divisions, it was not possible to determine if DSP sworn personnel have a higher incidence of the consequences of stress than other WisDOT employees. The literature search findings indicated that WisDOT DSP sworn officers are typical of other sworn law enforcement personnel in other parts of the country. They experience high levels of organizational and critical incident stress, and they seldom use designated support services to deal with the stress.

Implementation

The project provides a basis for further study of work-related stress in both DSP and other areas of WisDOT. Results indicate a need to reevaluate the department’s stress management program and related activities. A pilot study is now underway to obtain qualitative data to be used in planning and implementing a stress reduction program that will fit the needs of DSP personnel and be more likely to be used by them. WisDOT will continue its efforts to mitigate stress by offering employees and their family members access to helpful counseling services.

Benefits

The study documented the extent and nature of stress experienced by State Patrol sworn officers, bringing a clearer understanding of the problem and potential solutions. Efforts to reduce stress and improve the overall health and work productivity in DSP can be tailored to the particular needs surfaced by this study.

For more information, contact:

Sue Hunter: sue.hunter@dot.state.wi.us